By AT2 Parris English

The mission this day was typical for a VR squadron. We had to fly four legs up and down the East Coast, carrying an air wing from Norfolk to Jacksonville after a six-month deployment.

During my preflight on our C-9B, I found an inoperative down-lock light on the main-landing gear. This discrepancy makes the aircraft partial-mission capable and restricted us to daylight hours. Workcenter 200 tried to get a light assembly from Raytheon, but they didn't have one. After thumbing through the minimum-equipment list, talking with maintenance control, and consulting my aircraft commander, we decided to go without the light. We felt this decision didn't pose a problem because the flight was scheduled to arrive in Jacksonville at 1730 local, well before dusk this time of year.

The first part of the mission went smoothly—as well as an air wing move can be. On our second arrival in Norfolk, we learned the lift was delayed because the air wing had trouble getting off the boat. How long? We didn't know, but the break would be long enough to get a bite to eat from inside the terminal.

After a 2.5-hour delay, no one from the air wing was in sight, and the sun had faded below the horizon. My aircraft commander decided to ask VR-56, the C-9 squadron based in Norfolk, to bring us a light assembly.

I'm a C-9 crew chief, and one of my responsibilities is to maintain the aircraft on the road. With our new light assembly in hand, I grabbed a flight attendant (FA) on my crew and headed for the main-landing gear. I had to drop the MLG door to make the assembly more accessible. To do this, a bypass lever on the belly of the plane has to be opened. This system bleeds off pressure from the doors, lowers them, and prevents hydraulic pressure from being applied should the pumps accidentally come on.

After a struggle with the old, corroded light assembly, we finally installed the new one. While wrapping up the job in the wheelwell, the air wing finally arrived and was loaded.

Photo by Matthew J. Thomas

Look quickly at this photo. Is the hand signal a thumbs up or pick up the phone?

Another FA then came down to the wheelwell and asked my FA if we were clear for hydraulics, so he could raise the aft stairs. My helper said, "No! We will raise the stairs when we are finished here." Satisfied with that answer, the other FA returned to the aft station inside the aircraft and signaled to a third FA, who was standing 60 feet away at the forward station. The Sailor in the rear held up a clenched fist with his thumb and pinky extended, signaling to pick up the phone. The FA in front mistook this signal as a "thumbs up" and told the co-pilot in the cockpit to turn on the hydraulics.

Underneath the aircraft, I stepped off the MLG door to grab a screwdriver to finish the job. My FA assumed I was done, and he closed the bypass lever. When I stepped back on the MLG door to finish the job, he realized I wasn't done and quickly snatched the bypass lever, opening it once again. At that very instant, the hydraulic pumps came on and startled me. I jumped off the door and ducked out from the wheelwell. The door never moved, but, had the hydraulic pumps been turned on only a few seconds earlier, the MLG doors would have crushed me.

Hydraulics never should be applied before a person steps outside the aircraft, clears the area, and receives verbal acknowledgement from the worker and the person in the cockpit. Hand signals work for certain jobs, but they should not be used on this task because a signal can be mistaken for a thumbs up, meaning "good to go!"

I own some blame because I should have told my assistant that I personally would close the bypass lever when the job was done. He did respond quickly and prevented my body from being split in two. I guess that's why we have aircrew and groundcrew coordination training, remembering communications is the fourth and most critical step of DAMCLAS (decision making, assertiveness, mission analysis, communication, leadership, adaptability-flexibility, and situational awareness).

Petty Officer English is a crew chief and flies with VR-58.

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